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AUTHOR Loge, Peter
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ABSTRACT

Researchers often consider how personal attributes affect the data gathered, and how that effect can be eliminated, or at least minimalized. This question takes on added significance in the realm of politics. Numerous studies have examined the issue of interviewer/interviewee race. The results of these studies indicate that members of one race avoid answers they think will alienate an interviewer of another race, or that would be considered socially unacceptable. According to these studies, the results of surveys are most skewed for "racial questions" (questions about civil disobedience, racial intermarriage, and tolerance of racists). It would seem that the results of surveys conducted concerning candidates of a different race would have the same effects. Yet no results of such studies have been published. Carrying the analysis one step further, it can be argued that even if the interviewer and interviewee are of the same race, but the questions involve a candidate of a different race, the poll results could be misleading. This is a factor that has not been accounted for in the survey data to date. The following research hypothesis should be explored: the race of a political candidate in a campaign involving at least one white and one black candidate will serve as an uncontrolled independent variable in surveys regarding at least one black and one white candidate. Once the validity or invalidity of such a hypothesis is determined, researchers can work to educate the media and public about the potential invalidity of the results of such polls. (MM)

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Candidates of Race and Political Poll Results

Peter Loge
Graduate Assistant, Speech Communication
Syracuse University
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Introduction

> In the interview situation among the variables which it is not possible to change by training or practice are the personal characteristics of the interviewer. For certain types of interview these characteristics may become a bias-generating factor in the interview situation, leading to a systematic source of error. Age, sex, ethnic group, and color are some of these major background characteristics.(Athey et. al. 1960 244)

The question facing researchers has been to what extent do personal attributes affect the data gathered, and how can that affect be eliminated, or at least minimized? Doing all that is possible to understand and to adjust for such errors is crucial to the social scientist, for as Stanley Presser noted in 1984, "Perhaps the most fundamental question in survey research is that posed in the title of Herbert Hyman's 1944 paper, "Do They Tell the Truth?"(1984 344)

This question takes on added significance in the realm of politics, where polling data is not only used for further long-term research and planning, but becomes news itself(Stoval 1983). This polling data becomes an integral and crucial part of a political campaign(Altschuler 1982).

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In spite of the importance of the accuracy of such data, little has been done to examine the role that the race of the candidate, coupled with the race of the interviewer and interviewee, play in survey responses. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the probability of poll results being skewed when questions involve a candidate of race, and that the error will be exagerated by differences in the race of the interviewer and interviewee.

Discussion

Numerous studies have been done that examine the issue of race of interviewer/race of interviewee; Schuman and Converse noted, "past research show(s) race to be one interviewer attribute that definitely affects response patterns"(1971 44). Indeed, Schaeffer went as far as to write that, "Of the personal traits of the interviewer which are likely to affect survey findings, the importance of interviewer race is probably most clearly supported in the literature"(1980 400). Work in this area was first conducted by Herbert Hyman, who, in 1942, "in Memphis assigned 1,000 interviews with Negro (sic) respondents randomly between Negro and white interviewers" (Schuman and Converse 1971 45). In quoting the results of the study, Schuman and Converse explain that, "(there were) substantially different results...on most of the individual questions."(1971 45)

The results of these, and other studies, tend to support the claim that members of one race avoid answers that they think will alienate an interviewer of another race, or that would be considered socially unacceptable. This was one of the conclusions reached in 1975-76 by Hatchett and Schuman:

> The process for both races seems to be one of avoiding responses that might offend the interviewer of the "opposing" race, and of being frank (or at least more frank) with interviewers of one's own race(1975-76 527).

The reasons for this result vary with the race of the interviewer/ee. Schaeffer has noted that:

> The fact that black respondents sometimes take less militant positions when the interviewer is white has been seen as a response to the structure of race relations in American society. In this interpretation, blacks must calculate their responses to white interviewers in ways determined by the imbalance of social and political power between blacks and whites.(1980 402)

As early as 1960, Athey et al concluded that when a black wasn't the interviewer, but the interviewee, that, "significantly more 'socially acceptable' answers were given to the...Negro (sic) interviewers"(1960 245). A similar conclusion was reached by Anderson, Silver and Abramson in their study of self-reported voting, race of interviewer and actual voting. They reported that, "Race differences in reported civic attitudes and participation, as well as race differences in actual levels of participation, can be affected by the assignment of interviewers by race"(1988 78). According to the researchers, this difference

can be attributed to a need to appear 'socially correct'(Anderson, Silver and Abramson 1988 71-72).

That whites were also affected by the race of the interviewer/ee was noted by Hatchett and Schuman:

> Our results show white respondents to be at least as susceptible to race-of-interviewer effects as black respondents, and they thus call into question earlier interpretations which focus entirely on asymmetrical racial deference.(1975-76 527)

An explanation for this phenomenon can also be found in the need to appear socially responsible in the eyes of the interviewer. Hatchett and Schuman report:

> this trend for whites...is easy to explain, for we know from many studies that education and racial liberalism are usually positively correlated in the white population. It seems likely that it is more educated whites have the strongest need to appear tolerant in black eyes, and that they are therefore the people most likely to shift upward in liberal expression when the interviewer at their door is black.(1975-76 528; see also Anderson et al 1988 64-65)

This analysis could logically be carried to interviews done on the phone as well. If the interviewee and interviewer sound (to each other) as if they represent different races, the questions will be answered differently than if they thought they were of the same race(Tucker 1983).

For all of the above, the results of surveys are most skewed by 'racial questions' [about civil disobedience (Schuman and Converse 1971); racial intermarriage (Hatchett and Schuman 1975-76); tolerance of racists (Schaeffer 1980); etc.]. It would

seem, then, that the results of surveys conducted concerning candidates of race would have the same effect(s). That such should be the case is a view held by some working in the area of political polling and analysis. Walter Harris, Vice-President of Opinion Dynamics in Cambridge, Massachusetts expressed that, "A lot of polling services say that it (race) is a factor, but we try to deal with it...I think it's something people think about. From my point of view, it's there and the question is how to deal with it"(Interview 1989). This effect is most apparent in face-to-face interviews. In political polling, these are usually exit polls. Exit polling, while significant (Levy 1983), is also not done as often (for obvious reasons) and presents less of a threat to the direction of a campaign--most of the campaign is over by then.[1]

To the best of my knowledge, no results of such studies have been published. However, they soon will be; in "Race of Interviewer Effects in Political Polling" to be presented at the

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[1] The results of exit polls being broadcast have long been criticized for rendering meaningless all votes that are cast after a given point. It has also been asserted that exit poll knowledge can effect voting patterns--those who support the candidate in the lead feel less of a need to vote, and the supporters of the losing candidate have an additional incentive to vote. In a close race, the few voters effected can change the elections outcome. In lectures, J. Gregory Payne of Emerson College has posited that exit polls could have been a factor in Tom Bradley's failed bid at becoming governor of California in 1982--he lost by less than one percent, and early returns showed Mayor Bradley leading.

International Statistical Institute in September, Mitofsky and Edelman will present the results of a study conducted during the 1988 primary race in Chicago. The study, apparently, demonstrates a statistically significant link between race of interviewer and poll results.[2]

Carrying the analysis one step further, it can be argued that even if the interviewer and the interviewee are of the same race, but the quesitons involve a candidate of a different race, the poll results could be misleading. If a white voter has told a white interviewer that he/she is a Democrat, and is then asked if he/she voted for candidate A (black) or candidate B (white), the voter--wanting to look like a 'good Democrat'--may be more likely to report voting for candidate A. Similarly, any white voter--not wanting to appear to be racist--may be more likely to report voting for the black candidate, regardless of for whom the actual vote was cast. This would fit the "socially acceptable" response analysis above. This is a factor that has not been accounted for in the survey data done to date (including the

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[2] While updating my research, I phoned some experts in politics, polling and analysis, including Warren Mitofsky (Head of research for CBS). When I presented my research question to Mr. Mitofsky he responded, "There is definitely an effect of race of interviewer and race of interviewee". When I expressed surprise at such a definitive statement (not something I had gotten from anyone or anywhere else) he replied by telling me about the study he and Mr. Edelman conducted. As far as I know the paper is not yet available, but will be in September.

Mitofsky and Edelman study, as far as I know), and it is one that may be the hardest to control.

Hypothesis

The research hypothesis, then, is simply that: The race of a political candidate in a political campaign involving at least one white and at least one black candidate[3] will serve as an uncontrolled independent variable in surveys regarding at least one black and one white candidate.

Because political opinion polls have taken on such great importance in American politics, and (literally) the office of the Presidency--and by extension the future of the world--can be directly affected by the outcomes of such polls, we as researchers, ought to understand exactly what that those polls are measuring. The research done to date suggests that polls do not accurately measure peoples opinions when matters of race are involved, and that the race of the interviewer/ee is a factor. We should find out if this is true for political opinion polls. Additionally, work should be done in the area of the effect of the candidate of race independent of the race of the interviewer/ee.

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[3]. If both of the candidates were minorities, then the effect(s) of whites would have little bearing. The results of the survey could probably be applied to such campaigns with some assurance of accuracy, but that is not the goal of this study.

Having assessed the validity or invalidity of such a hypothesis, we can then act to correct the error.

Implications

Null Set: Clearly, there is a belief among political professionals, a broad base of circumstantial evidence, and (as yet unseen) quantitative analysis that suggests a link between race and political poll results. If, however, attempts to duplicate the research conducted by Edelman and Mitofsky reveal that there is no statistically significant relationship between the race of the interviewer/ee and poll results when a candidate of race is involved, then alternative explanations must be found. These explanations could include a deeper analysis of the issues involved in a campaign (in Chicago economic situations that disproportionatly effect blacks could have been a factor, last minute voting decisions, protest voting, etc.) or a broader issue of race relations in general. This result would also lead one in the direction of rejecting the notion of subtle racism--if racism were a factor it would be overt.

Rejection of the Null Set: All analysis points in this direction. If there is a relationship between the race of interviewer/ee and the race of the candidate, or the race of the candidate independent of the race of the interviewer/ee, then the validity of all polls in which race can be a factor are called

into question. The question becomes, what can or should be done to mitigate the effect of the race of interviewer/ee?

While it would be inappropriate to call for the abandonment of polling, there are some steps that could be taken. The focus group could be one way to decrease the effects of race. Walter Harris suggests that focus groups largely made up of similar demographic groups could yield accurate responses (Interview 1989). An increased reliance on telephone polling, in which the race of the interviewer is less obvious, also becomes an option. Anderson et al suggest an increased emphasis on placing interviewers in situations where their contact with members of the opposite race will be diminished (Anderson et al 1988 56). While this can often be difficult to do, it can help; to further diminish the effects of race, interviewers could be instructed to speak only to members of the same race. If the probability of error due to race were evenly distributed across the interviewers, then the results could be more accurately interpreted.

If the last hypothetical supposition (that the race of the candidate effects the results, regardless of the race of the interviewer/ee), is true, then only the focus group solution would seem to work. In none of the other potential responses is one building the level of trust needed to garner truthful responses.

Conclusion

That the race of the interviewer and interviewee will disrupt poll results is not really debatable. What does remain are two related questions: what effect does the race of interviewer/ee have on political polls when a candidate of race is involved; and what effect does the race of the candidate have on the results of those polls-regardless of the race of the interviewer/ee? The results of similar studies, and the analysis provided by those studies and by polling professionals suggests that there is an effect. Further, the evidence indicates that the effect is significant.

To better understand how big an impact race plays in political polls, we need to await the results of the Mitofsky and Edelman study, and then attempt to replicate the results of that study--as well as fill in any gaps that Mitofsky and Edelman left.

Unfortunately, while we test the hypotheses, the public may be provided incorrect polling data. Therefore, we should also work to educate the media and public about the potential invalidity of the results of those polls.

When we better understand of the impact of race on polling, we can act to correct it. In correcting, we can answer Herbert Hyman's 1944 question, "yes, they do tell the truth".

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